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ABSTRACT

Concerned with Southern populations of open-country rural areas, the objectives of this study were: (1) identification of changes in quality of life of the study population since 1960; (2) delineation of those aspects of quality of life considered inadequate by the residents; and (3) testing of the hypothesis that community leaders, due to their more favorable socio-economic and political status, view rural living conditions differently than the residents themselves. Via personal interview, respondents were asked questions relative to 6 areas: educational opportunities; county government and law enforcement; environmental conditions; availability of community services; income; and general quality of life for selected subgroups. The sample county, predominantly rural nonfarm, was almost 50 percent black; median education level was 9.0; and median family income was $5,973. Of the 25 community leaders, randomly chosen, 18 completed the interview. The randomly selected household sample afforded 72 completed questionnaires. Black respondents constituted a subsample of the total household group with 31 responses. Results revealed that community leaders tended to rate the current situation more favorably than the other two groups; all groups reported progress but the black group noted a slight decline in income, though they responded favorably to educational opportunities. (JC)

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Perceptions of Quality of Life in Rural Open-Country Areas: A Case Study[1]

by

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Introduction

For many decades there has been a considerable redistribution of the population of the United States, with large numbers of persons moving from the rural regions to the major urban centers of the nation. These migrants and the changes they have imposed on both the urban areas to which they migrated and the rural areas which they left have been of no small interest to demographers, sociologists, or other social scientists and persons in policy making positions.

These areas of interest include the delineation of major social, economic and other related changes which have taken place in the rural areas which the migrants left, and the delineation of changes which have occurred in the general quality of life for families in the rural areas.[2]

This paper is concerned with the rural population of the South, specifically with the population of the open-country rural areas, that is, those areas which are not closely associated with the towns and larger cities. It has as its basic objectives: (1) the identification of changes in the quality of life of the study population since 1960, (2) the delineation of those aspects of the quality of life which were considered inadequate by the

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[1] Paper presented at 1973-74 meeting of Southern Association of Agricultural Scientists, Rural Sociology Section.

[2] This paper is written in conjunction with the S-79 project, "Rural Development and Quality of Life in the Rural South" and these concerns are among those of S-79.

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residents themselves, and (3) the testing of the general hypothesis that the community leaders, because of their more favorable socio-economic and political positions, would tend to view living conditions in the rural areas somewhat differently from the residents themselves.

Respondents were asked questions related to six general subject areas: 1. County government and law enforcement; 2. Educational opportunities for county residents; 3. Environmental conditions; 4. The availability of community services; 5. Income; 6. General quality of life for selected subgroups in the county population. The specific questions (see Table 2) were part of a larger more inclusive schedule developed for the S-79 project relating to rural development and the quality of life in the rural south.

The Sample County

The county utilized in this study was determined at the onset of the S-79 project and was not chosen specifically for this paper. It was one of a large number of counties in the southern region of the United States to be chosen as the basis of a comprehensive study of the open-country rural population of the South. All of the counties in the S-79 sample were counties with low standards of living in 1960.

The sample county is predominantly rural, with about seven percent of the population classified as rural farm and another sixty-nine percent of the population being categorized as rural-nonfarm. The remaining twenty-four percent of the population is urban, being primarily located in the two small towns within the county.

Just over eighty percent of the county is forested. With only twenty persons per square mile, it is not densely populated. Almost fifty percent of the population is black. The median age of the total population is 28.5,

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while that of the black population is 19.8.

The median level of education attained is 9.0 years of school. This is considerably below the median years of school completed for all persons in the South (11.9). The median family income of $5,973 is also considerably lower than the median family income for families living in the South ($8,080).

Despite its large rural population, less than ten percent of the work force is employed in agriculture-related industries. Just over forty percent of the work force is employed in manufacturing industries. Another twenty-one percent is employed in service occupations and just over sixteen percent is employed in wholesale and retail trade.

The Sample of Community Leaders

The community leaders were chosen in the conventional way of identifying such persons. At the outset, positional leaders in the community were called upon to list those persons in the community whom they felt could be characterized as influential persons in the community. These lists were combined and the persons listed by the positional leaders were contacted and also asked to supply a list of names of persons whom they thought were influential in the community. The process was repeated several times until a representative list of leaders evolved. From this final list, twenty-five individuals were chosen at random and contacted regarding the questionnaire. Of the twenty-five individuals, eighteen completed the interview schedule.

Some characteristics of this sample group are listed in Table 1. In general, the characteristics of the community leaders differ considerably from either the characteristics of the sample county or from the household respondents.

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(Table 1 about here)

The Household Sample

A county highway map delineating enumeration districts and marking the location of occupied housing units was utilized to derive the sample. A grid was superimposed upon the map in such a manner that each square in the grid contained ten occupied housing units. After eliminating those squares containing any population residing in towns or villages, each square was assigned an identification number and the required number of squares from each enumeration district was randomly chosen. The persons living in the selected areas were then personally interviewed and 72 completed questionnaires were obtained for this study. The size of both sample groups was determined by the requirements set forth in the S-79 guidelines.

The characteristics of the household sample, like the characteristics of the community leaders, differed considerably from the characteristics of the county population in general. Unfortunately, no data are available specifically for what has been defined here as the open-country rural population, so it is not possible to determine exactly how representative the sample is. However, given the sampling procedure, there is little reason to doubt that a representative sample was obtained.

Because of the large black population of the county, the responses of the black individuals were analyzed separately as a subsample of the total household group. There were thirty-one black respondents.

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Identification of Community Needs and Progress

In the personal interview, respondents were asked to state whether the situation described in questions had "improved," "remained the same" or "gotten worse" since 1960. They were further asked to rate the current status of each of the situations described as either "very good," "pretty good," "fair," or "poor." Utilizing the total number of responses to each question, an average response was calculated on the basis of a weighted averaging method much like the method used to calculate cumulative grade averages. The questions and their average scores are presented in Table 2. The items which received the highest and lowest scores are briefly discussed in the following two sections.

(Table 2 about here)

Items with Most Favorable Responses

All of the community leaders felt the county had improved as a place to live since 1960, and a substantial percentage of both the total household sample and the black subsample concurred with this evaluation. The average response of the community leaders to the question concerning the present status of the county as a place to live was "pretty good" to "very good." The average response of the total household group was that the county was a "pretty good" place to live while the average response of the black subgroup was "fair" to "pretty good."

The five questions which received the most favorable response in each of the three sample groups are listed in Table 3. There was a considerable amount of variation among the three groups. Only the question concerned with opportunities for blacks was included in all three groups.

All of the community leaders felt that the situation for blacks had

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improved since 1960, while ninety percent of the household group and ninety-three percent of the blacks were of the same opinion.

The quality of medical care and health services was rated high among the total household group and the black subgroup. Further, sixty-nine percent of the household group and eighty-three percent of the blacks felt the situation had improved since 1960.

(Table 3 about here)

The community leaders, however, did not share this high opinion of medical care and health services. They placed this item among the ten receiving the lowest average score. However, sixty-three percent of the leaders did feel that there had been an improvement in this area since 1960, but the remaining thirty-seven percent felt there had been no change. Much of the difference in attitude toward the quality of medical care can probably be explained by the more favorable socio-economic characteristics of the community leaders in that possibly they perceived a greater need for medical attention and medical specialists.

The total household group and the black subgroup also ranked the item concerned with the quality of private schools among the five items receiving the most favorable scores. Although the community leaders did not rank it among the five top items, there was very little difference in the average score of this item among the three groups. In fact, the community leaders actually rated the quality of private schools slightly higher than either of the other two groups.

The situation, however, was quite different regarding the attitudes toward public schools. While this item was included among the five items

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receiving the most favorable response among blacks, both the community leaders and the household group rated the quality of public schools low enough to be included among the five items receiving the lowest score for these two groups. Sixty-nine percent of the community leaders felt the quality of the public schools had "gotten worse" and thirty-two percent of the total household sample were of the same opinion. In contrast, all of the black respondents felt the situation had improved.

Items with Least Favorable Responses

There was very little variation among the three sample groups regarding the five items which received the least favorable responses (see Table 4). All five items which received the lowest scores from the leaders also received the lowest scores from the household group. Three of the five items were also found among those receiving the lowest scores from the black respondents.

Obedience to the laws was a major concern of all three groups of respondents. The community leaders considered "obedience to laws, by all, young and old" to be only "fair" while the household groups and black subgroup considered it to be "fair" to "pretty good." While the respondents in both the household and the black groups felt that there had been essentially no change in the situation since 1960, the community leaders generally felt that the situation had become worse.

(Table 4 about here)

Crime and law enforcement was another major problem identified by respondents in all three groups. The community leaders, while they did consider it to be a major problem, did feel that law enforcement was somewhat better than either the total household group or the black group of respondents.

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Respondents in all three groups felt that there had been essentially no change in the situation since 1960. The differences in opinion between the community leaders and the remaining respondents are probably in part due to their respective positions in the county.

The question related to politics and political parties was also among the five items receiving the lowest scores by both the community leaders and the total household group. Black respondents also considered this to be a problem although not so much of one as the other two groups. The community leaders generally felt that there had been no change in the situation since 1960, while the other two groups felt that there had been some improvement in this regard.

Pespondents in all three groups rated recreational facilities low enough that this item was included among the five items receiving the lowest score. The scores for all three groups were similar with the respondents generally considering the recreational facilities to be only "fair" to "pretty good." However, respondents in all three groups felt that there had been some improvement in recreational facilities since 1960. The black respondents indicated slightly more improvement than either of the other groups.

The black group of respondents also considered real income to be a major problem (as did the remaining two groups, but to a lesser degree). However, while both the community leaders and the total household group noted some improvement since 1960, the black respondents felt the situation had become worse for them. These differences probably reflect in part the general state of the job market and the lower education of the black respondents. Indeed, the black respondents did consider job opportunities to be a major problem. In contrast, this question received the most favorable response from the community leaders and was rated quite high in the household group. Even with

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this variation, all three groups noted considerable improvement since 1960.

Comparison of Responses

To test the hypothesis that the responses of the community leaders would be significantly different from the responses of the persons participating the household survey, the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test was utilized. More specifically, the chi-square approximation utilizing the "D" statistic was used. The statistic thus obtained is approximated by the chi-square distribution with two degrees of freedom. This test was thought appropriate because it utilizes ordinal data and is adequate with a small sample. The test, however, becomes conservative as the size of the sample decreases.

A series of specific hypotheses was developed regarding each of the items included in the questionnaire. While this list is not presented here due to its length, the hypotheses were of such a nature that it was expected that the community leaders would usually respond to the questions more favorably than the household sample or the black sample.

(Table 5 about here)

In general, there was a relatively high degree of agreement between the leaders and the household sample in that there were highly significant differences on only four questions. The community leaders and the black sample had significant differences on only five questions. These questions and the associated chi-square values are listed in Table 5.

In the comparisons between the responses of the leaders and the total household sample, the leaders consistently answered the questions more favorably. In the comparison with the black group, the community leaders

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answered four of the five questions more favorably, the exception being the question dealing with the quality of the public schools.

Despite these questions where there was significant disagreement, there does appear to be sufficient data to suggest that there is a considerable amoung of communication between the leaders located in the towns and open-country rural residents. The leaders do seem to be generally aware of the problems of the open-country rural population even though they do not live in these areas and have quite different socio-economic profiles.

Summary

There are basically two ways of evaluating socio-economic change in an area over a given period of time. The first of these is through the evaluation of objective data such as census materials, public health records, tax records, and other similar sources of data. The second method consists of asking the persons living in the area to give their own estimation of changes in the quality of their life. It is this latter approach which has been utilized in this paper.

Some general trends are apparent from the data. The community leaders with a few exceptions tended to rate the current situation more favorably than either the household group or the black subgroup of respondents. The attitudes of respondents in all three groups toward progress since 1960 was similar, with respondents generally perceiving the situation to have improved. The notable exceptions to this among the community leaders were the situations concerning obedience to laws and the quality of public schools. Among the total household group, some progress was indicated among all the items while among the black respondents a slight decline in the situation concerned with

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real income was noted.

In general, scores for all three groups of respondents were lowest for the questions concerned with county government. Among the community leaders, the questions concerned with educational opportunities were ranked second lowest. Interestingly enough, the black respondents responded more favorably to the group of questions concerned with educational opportunities than to any other group. Among both the household group and the black group of respondents, there was some concern with income as evidenced by the relatively low scores on this set of questions. These two groups were also somewhat more concerned about the environmental conditions than the community leaders. Questions concerning the availability of community services received fairly favorable responses from all the respondents. The only exception was the question concerning the availability of recreational opportunities.

Community leaders did appear to be aware of needs of the open-country population although there were some important differences, particularly regarding job opportunities for blacks in the open-country areas.

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Table 1. Selected Demographic Characteristics of the Sample Groups

Characteristic	Community Leaders	Household Sample	Black Subsample
Median Age	50	57.9	61.8
Race: White	100.0%	54.9%	--
Black	--	45.1%	100.0%
Sex: Male	68.7%	73.2%	64.5%
Female	31.3%	26.8%	35.5%
Median Years of Education	15.5	8.3	6.5
Marital Status			
Married	87.4%	60.6%	48.5%
Never married	6.3	5.6	6.4
Divorced	--	2.8	--
Separated	--	2.8	6.4
Widowed	6.3	26.8	35.5
No information	--	1.4	3.2
Occupation			
Homemaker	12.5%	5.6%	5.4%
Farm operator or manager	--	9.9	--
Farm laborer or foreman	--	2.8	6.4
Manager, proprietor, professional, technical	81.2	5.6	--
Sales	--	4.2	--
Clerical	--	2.8	--
Craftsman and foreman	--	2.8	--
Operatives	--	11.3	9.7
Service workers	--	9.9	16.1
Domestic service	--	5.6	12.9
Labor	--	11.3	12.9
Disabled	--	7.0	12.9
Retired	6.3	19.7	19.4
No information	--	1.5	3.3

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Table 2. Average Scores for Each Question Asked of Respondents

Question	Current Situation*			Improvement Since 1960**		
	Community Leaders	Total Household	Black Group	Community Leaders	Total Household	Black Group
Questions Related to County Government:						
Quality of county government (more or less, honest, efficient, progressive, etc.)	3.13	2.65	2.85	2.3	2.3	2.7
Politics and political parties	2.60	2.49	2.68	2.0	2.5	2.5
Crime and law enforcement	2.50	2.25	2.14	2.1	2.1	2.0
Obedience to the laws by all citizens	2.06	2.40	2.44	1.2	2.1	2.3
Questions Related to Educational Opportunities:						
Quality of public schools	2.14	2.57	3.04	1.5	2.3	3.0
Quality of private schools	3.20	3.18	3.00	2.6	2.9	2.8
Opportunities for education and training beyond high school for people in the county	2.80	2.83	2.80	2.6	2.7	2.8
Questions Related to Environmental Conditions:						
Situation with regard to agriculture and land use	3.40	2.76	2.68	2.6	2.5	2.5
Quality of the physical environment (air, water, soil and forests)	3.31	2.79	2.71	2.6	2.6	2.7
Questions Relating to the Availability of Services:						
Quality of medical care and health services	2.81	2.94	3.07	2.6	2.7	2.8
Welfare programs	3.07	2.75	2.73	2.2	2.8	2.7

(continued)

Table 2. Average Scores for Each Question Asked of Respondents, Continued

Question	Current Situation*			Improvement Since 1960**		
	Community Leaders	Total Household	Black Group	Community Leaders	Total Household	Black Group
Quality of roads and transporation systems	3.25	2.96	2.90	3.0	2.9	2.8
Recreational opportunities	2.44	2.54	2.50	2.4	2.5	2.6
Quality of churches and religion	3.25	2.94	2.90	2.3	2.5	2.4
Public utilities	3.50	2.92	2.77	3.0	2.8	2.9
Provision of good housing (building of public housing, subsizied housing for low income persons, etc.)	3.25	2.98	3.08	3.0	2.7	2.8
Questions Relating to Income:						
Income for people who work for wages	3.13	2.91	2.85	3.0	2.9	2.
Job opportunities for county residents	3.56	2.83	2.59	2.9	2.9	2.7
Real income	2.88	2.64	2.52	2.8	2.2	1.9
Questions Relating to Quality of Life in General:						
Quality of life for poor people	3.06	2.80	2.79	3.0	2.7	2.6
Situation and opportunities for young people	2.63	2.84	2.96	2.9	2.8	2.6
Situation for old people	2.63	2.80	2.90	2.6	2.5	2.5
Situation and opportunities for blacks	3.13	2.99	2.96	3.0	2.9	2.7
The county as a place to live	3.69	3.11	2.97	3.0	2.7	2.6

* Very Good 4.0
Pretty Good 3.0
Fair 2.0
Poor 1.0

** Improved 3.0
No change 2.0
Gotten Worse 1.0

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Table 2. Average Scores for Each Question Asked of Respondents, Continued

Question	Current Situation*			Improvement Since 1960**		
	Community Leaders	Total Household	Black Group	Community Leaders	Total Household	Black Group
Quality of roads and transporation systems	3.25	2.96	2.90	3.0	2.9	2.8
Recreational opportunities	2.44	2.54	2.50	2.4	2.5	2.6
Quality of churches and religion	3.25	2.94	2.90	2.3	2.5	2.4
Public utilities	3.50	2.92	2.77	3.0	2.8	2.9
Provision of good housing (building of public housing, subsizied housing for low income persons, etc.)	3.25	2.98	3.08	3.0	2.7	2.8
Questions Relating to Income:						
Income for people who work for wages	3.13	2.91	2.85	3.0	2.9	2.8
Job opportunities for county residents	3.56	2.83	2.59	2.9	2.9	2.7
Real income	2.88	2.64	2.52	2.8	2.2	1.9
Questions Relating to Quality of Life in General:						
Quality of life for poor people	3.06	2.80	2.79	3.0	2.7	2.6
Situation and opportunities for young people	2.63	2.84	2.96	2.9	2.8	2.6
Situation for old people	2.63	2.80	2.90	2.6	2.5	2.5
Situation and opportunities for blacks	3.13	2.99	2.96	3.0	2.9	2.7
The county as a place to live	3.69	3.11	2.97	3.0	2.7	2.6

* Very Good 4.0
Pretty Good 3.0
Fair 2.0
Poor 1.0

** Improved 3.0
No change 2.0
Gotten Worse 1.0

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Table 3. Items Receiving the Most Favorable Response from Each Group of Respondents, Listed in Descending Order

Community Leaders	Household Sample	Black Subgroup
1. Job opportunities for county residents	1. Quality of private schools	1. Provision of good housing
2. Public utilities	2. Situation and opportunities for blacks	2. Quality of medical care and health services
3. Situation with regard to land use	3. Quality of life for poor people	3. Quality of public schools
4. Quality of physical environment	4. Quality of roads and transportation	4. Quality of private schools
5. Situation and opportunities for blacks	5. Quality of medical care and health services	5. Situation and opportunities for blacks

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Table 4. Items Receiving the Least Favorable Response from Each Group of Respondents, Listed in Descending Order

Community Leaders	Household Sample	Black Subgroup
1. Obedience to the laws by all, young and old	1. Crime and law enforcement	1. Crime and law enforcement
2. Quality of public schools	2. Obedience to the laws by all, young and old	2. Obedience to the laws by all, young and old
3. Recreational opportunities	3. Politics and political parties	3. Recreational opportunities
4. Crime and law enforcement	4. Recreational opportunities	4. Real income
5. Politics and political parties	5. Quality of public schools	5. Job opportunities for county residents

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Table 5. Chi-square Values for Those Questions for Which Significant Differences were Found

Question	Community Leaders/ Household Sample	Community Leaders/ Black Subsample
1. Quality of public schools	N.A.	14.18**
2. Situation with regard to agriculture and land use	8.49**	8.50**
3. Public utilities	9.23**	9.13**
4. Job opportunities for county residents	8.49**	16.98**
5. The county as a place to live	9.63**	7.77*

* Significant at .05 level

** Significant at .01 level

N.A. Not applicable

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